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## **Towards Sustainability in Australian Social Work Field Education**

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### **Abstract**

The educational framework of Australian social work field education has remained static over the past few decades. Emerging challenges are creating a compelling case for change. These include increasing demand for placements, declining capacity of organizations to provide placement requirements, reduction in practitioners' incentives and capacity to support student placements and to facilitate a work integrated learning context, and an interrelated web of policies and regulations that constrain adaptation to these changes. In a critical exploration of multiple levels of regulation and policy contexts, we argue that conventional approaches to social work field education are not sustainable given significant changes to the funding arrangements for universities and within the welfare service system. To future proof integrative learning in social work, we advocate transformation of educational culture, policies, and design toward sustainability.

### **Implications**

- Supervised placements are designed to integrate practice and academic learning but their future use as the single means for achieving this integration will be unsustainable.

- Drawing on an ecological orientation enables social work educators to position sustainability as a key consideration and response to current constraints in higher education and the field.
- Focusing on sustainability across policy, practice and regulation contexts has potential to generate transformative change which enhances our effectiveness in future proofing the design of integrative learning in social work.

### **Keywords**

Student Placement; Sustainability; Educational Design; Transformation

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## Introduction

The provision of supervised practice experiences based in industry settings is a requirement for all social work programs in Australia. This pedagogical approach, often described as field education, prepares students for professional practice, status and employment through “emersion in real practice contexts” (AASW, 2017, p. 25). Practice based learning is also called work integrated learning (Billet, 2012; Orrell, 2011) and we use these terms interchangeably to reflect pedagogy which integrates learning situated in educational institutions and applied settings. Integration of theoretical learning with professional practice is a key outcome of placements that increases employability (Smith, Ferns & Russell, 2014). Government projections show that employment for Social Workers to November 2020 is expected to grow very strongly ([www.joboutlook.gov.au](http://www.joboutlook.gov.au)). Although field education is a key vehicle for delivering the employability agenda within social work and represents a significant proportion of the educational curriculum of the Bachelor degree (at least 25%) and Master’s degree (up to 50%), some have observed that it occupies a marginalised position in academia (Bloomfield, Chambers, Egan, Goulding, Reimann, Waugh & White, 2013).

In this article, current constraints in social work field education are explored, with a focus on policy and regulation. In this critical appraisal, we discuss examples of contexts created by policy and regulation at organisation, government, university, and professional levels as they impact on field education. We suggest that some educational traditions in social work field education are challenging to sustain within current and emerging contexts, and are unsustainable without systemic change. We draw on Sterling’s ideas of an “integrative and ecological approach” to education (2001, p. 27) and apply Bogo’s question “how can we use resources differently?” (2015, p. 322) to explore possibilities and advance a debate on the future of field education in Australia and elsewhere. Our suggestions for change reflect our focus on sustainable social work field education.

## Discussion

Field education relies on a model of externalising learning beyond the university and into the workplace, delivered by social workers in the field, who “educate” through professional supervision (Bloomfield, et al. 2013). Social Work field education is thus situated in the space between different stakeholders and contexts, and this design relies on relationships and dialogue for the ongoing process of ‘sense making’ that frames learning situations (Luras, 2016, p. 31). Alongside students, stakeholders include professional bodies, higher education providers, government, employers, and social work practitioners (Sterling, 2008, p. 64). Sterling (2008, p. 64, 65) argues that when “new conditions and discontinuities” arise, then an ecological or systemic orientation is required to redesign an educational paradigm that can be responsive to such changes. Sterling named this paradigm “anticipative education” (2008, p. 64). Sterling (2001, p. 27) proposes that competing traditions are generating tensions in educational policy and practice. He argues that 19<sup>th</sup> Century neo-classical and humanist models of education are being “aggressively challenged” (Sterling, 2001, p. 27) by neo-liberal and neo-conservative views modelled on 21<sup>st</sup> Century economic markets, economic change and globalism. He critiques the managerial and mechanistic paradigm that increasingly dominates education, and the influence of “reductionism, objectivism, materialism and dualism” (Sterling, 2008, p. 64). Sterling cited Bateson (1997 in Sterling, 2008, p. 65) to argue that educational systems whose factory design reflects “the machine age” are problematic and now need to switch “to an ecological age ...to design schools, families and social systems in terms of maintaining the quality of life, not just for our species but for the whole planet”. Similarly, Bogo questions the viability of an approach based largely on a 100-year-old educational model of preparing social workers within voluntary agency- based settings (2015, p. 321). Situating discussion of “the problematic” (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) in social work field education within a systemic paradigm gives us access to

language from the domain of ecology, such as sustainable development (UNESCO, 2002).

Definitions of sustainable include “able to be sustained at a certain rate or level”

(“sustainable”, 2016b), and “a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged” (“sustainable”, 2016a). Sterling argues that a “redesigned educational paradigm that is ecological is ...relational, engaged, ethically orientated and locally and globally relevant” (2008, p. 64).

We situate this discussion within this paradigm, speaking from our lived experience of local perspectives as three academics engaged in field education in higher education programs in diverse geographical contexts across Australia and as members of the National Field Education Network (NFEN). The NFEN is an initiative under the auspices of the Australian and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWWER) and is a forum for identifying and responding to social work field education issues and for recognising and sharing strengths, goals, capacities and creativity (Rollins, Egan, Zuchowski, Duncan, Chee, Muncey, Hill & Higgins, 2017).

McNamee and Gergen discuss “relationally responsibility as a dialogic process with two transformative functions” involving transforming understandings and relationships (1999, p. 5). Drawing on a discourse of interdependence, conversations can explore our relatedness to problematic conditions, and transform understandings and meaning. This kind of dialogue has potential to scaffold critical re-examination of our understandings and relationships with cultural practices and discourses in field education and its “paradigms, policies, purposes and practices...and its adequacy for the age we find ourselves in” (Sterling, 2008, p. 63). Sterling argues for an educational culture that

“...develops and embodies the theory and practice of sustainability in a way which is critically aware. It is therefore a transformative paradigm which values, sustains and

realises human potential in relation to the need to attain and sustain social, economic and ecological wellbeing, recognizing that they must be part of the same dynamic” (2001, p. 22).

Relational and dialogical approaches offer resources with potential for transforming educational culture toward “... cooperation and coherence between all aspects of education” (Sterling, 2008, p. 66). As with all stakeholders, the NFEN has potential for promoting sustainability in policy and regulation frameworks (Rollins, et al. 2017); to navigate beyond an approach that “tacitly assumes that the future is some kind of linear extension of the past...towards anticipative education...recognizing the new conditions and discontinuities...” (Sterling, 2008, p. 64); and to promote an educational culture that is both sustaining and sustainable for field education in the context of the contemporary, wider ecology of social work.

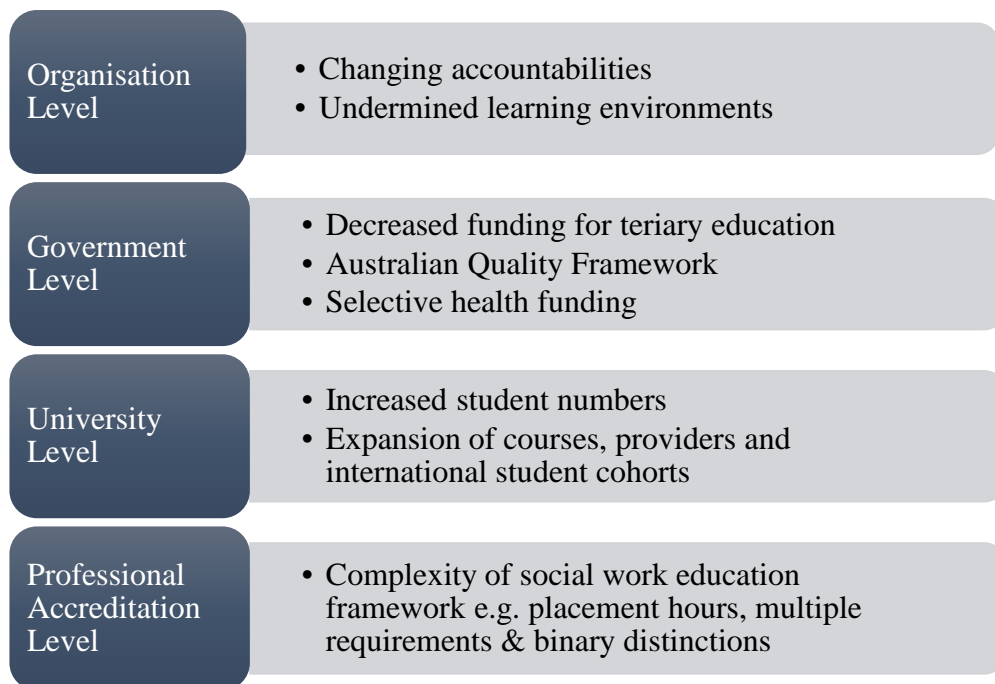
Field Education in the United States has been designated as the “signature pedagogy” of social work education (Bogo, 2015). This designation is enhancing the status of practice learning beyond a “cottage industry” in social work academia (Cooper, 2007 and Spencer & McDonald, 1998, cited in Bloomfield, et al. 2013, p. 11), through recognition by regulatory and professional bodies. In Australia, the AASW (2017) has recently re-affirmed field education as central to social work education. However, the continued delivery of this single model has come under strain as the numbers of field education placements have increased (Cleak & Smith, 2012) and the number of programs has risen. Also, there is emerging evidence which challenges conventional assumptions about the learning activities and integration opportunities offered through this model of supervised placement. For example, in one study of 263 students in Australia “approximately half of the 263 students in the study did not regularly have an opportunity to observe social work practice, have their practice

observed, or to link social work theory and the Code of Ethics to their practice with their social work supervisor” (Smith et al, 2015, p. 515).

Bogo invites us to go beyond the constraints of “not enough resources” to ask, “How can we use resources differently?” (2015, p. 322). We apply this question as a lens for considering our understandings and relationships with changes in conditions and for discussion of sustainability. To explore these from an ecological perspective, we draw on a range of examples from specific policy, practice, and regulation issues across four levels of the field education system (See Figure 1). At an Organisation level, we outline how the professional context is affected by changing accountabilities, funding and the influence of neo-liberal contexts in the political landscape. At a Government level, we consider the impact of changing economics such as decreased funding and loss of funding for practice learning, the influence of the Australian Quality Framework and selective funding to increase the health workforce. At a University level, we discuss the influence of changes in Government policy regarding increased student numbers, expansion of courses and providers and of international student cohorts. At a Professional Accreditation level, we examine the complexity of professional social work education frameworks using as examples recognition of prior learning, number of hours and integration of multiple requirements and outcomes. We conclude by outlining potential contexts for generative dialogue that may contribute to the embedding of sustainability as a discourse into our educational culture.



**Figure 1: Levels and Examples of Policy, Practice and Regulation having an Impact on Field Education**



### **Organisation Level: A Changing Professional Context**

For more than a decade trends have emerged in the transformation of human services workforce conditions that include a reduction in professional positions within many government (statutory) and non-government social services almost universally across Australia, the U.K. and Canada (Healy, 2004). This contrasts with public policy drivers that call for increased quality and efficiency in social services (Healy, 2004). A reduction in financial investment and resources to meet these drivers, together with increased demands for managerial-informed outcomes by governments has resulted in growth in employment of lower qualified workers and non-social work trained workers to do jobs that once were filled by professionally qualified social workers. At the same time, there is a general increase in social work practice, human service organisations and in social work education, particularly in the Australian, Asian, and Indian contexts (Healy & Lonne, 2010). The undersupply of qualified social work practitioners within a rapidly ageing human services workforce has led

to major government and non-government human services agencies employing many of their practitioners with Diploma level qualifications (Healy & Lonne, 2010). Areas such as child safety, disability and juvenile justice have been most prone to this “de-credentialing” of the workforce (Healy, 2004). High rates of turnover in social work positions and new graduate burn-out are also having a significant impact on the development the human service industry (Healy & Lonne, 2010).

These trends have resulted in a gradual expansion of professional social work education programs throughout the eastern seaboard of Australia specifically, most of which are centred in inner urban areas. However, in terms of workforce, graduates are particularly needed in outer urban growth areas, regional growth centres and rural communities (Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett & Diamandi, 2014). Increases in numbers of courses, providers of social work programs and student cohort sizes are putting pressure on social work programs to secure enough placement opportunities for their students (Zuchowski, 2015). Concurrently, pressures in the work place environment are expanding, leading to a declining capacity of field educators to supervise students in field education (Barretti, 2007). Contributing factors that challenge social work field educators’ capacity to assist students’ professional learning include workload issues, staff retention and recruitment issues and the challenges of a crisis-driven environment (Chinnery & Beddoe, 2011). Social workers in this current environment face high demands, such as increased accountability, reduced autonomy, complex and high caseloads, and minimal managerial support (Kalliath, Hughes, & Newcombe, 2012). All of which have an impact on their availability and motivation to support students in field education (Barton, Bell & Bowles, 2005). Students have experienced difficulties in accessing supervision, finding opportunities to observe their supervisor’s practice or have their own practice observed (Barretti, 2009). Concerns about quality in placement learning arise as agencies and field education teams are increasingly under pressure. These concerns include

questions about the agency's ability to create a pedagogically valuable learning environment and the possibility that students' learning can be undermined by workplace practices that are contrary to professional values and aims (Bellinger, 2010). University Field Education unit staff have an important role in scaffolding and capacity building quality integrative education. However escalating numbers and demands in managing field placements have resulted in increasing use of externally hired liaison staff and supervisors, potentially having an impact on the quality of educational learning experience (Zuchowski, 2015).

### **Government Level: Increased Expectations and Reduced Funding**

The AQF sets the criteria and level of competencies required in Australian tertiary education (AQF, 2013). Higher education courses must articulate the alignment of professional body accreditation requirements to this framework, reflecting the distinctions made between AQF educational levels. Bachelor Degree level graduates (Level 7 Criteria) need to demonstrate "broad and coherent theoretical and technical knowledge", to have "well-developed cognitive, technical and communication skills" and to demonstrate "autonomy, well-developed judgement and responsibility..." (AQF, 2013, p. 13). Master's Degree level graduates (Level 9 Criteria) need to show "advanced and integrated understanding of a complex body of knowledge", to evidence "expert, specialized cognitive and technical skills" and to demonstrate autonomy, expert judgement, adaptability, and responsibility as a practitioner ... (AQF, 2013, p. 13). There is a clear differentiation in the levels to be attained; yet, the AASW requirements for students of both degrees reflect attainment of the same graduate attributes contained in the accreditation standards for social work education, recognizing that the Master's Degree qualifies the graduate to enter a profession (AASW, 2017). To build sustainability into a diverse pathway requiring different levels of learning on placement, guidance on how an entry level work social work qualification can be reconciled

with these different expectations will assist the field to enable achievement of these requirements.

Government policy has aimed to shape workforce development. We draw attention to a policy of selective funding by Government, for some tertiary institutions to pay for clinical placements in health and allied health (including social work). During the period 2009-2014, clinical placement data were collected annually by Health Workforce Australia (HWA, formerly AHWO), to inform integrated planning of intended and actual growth of clinical placements in the health sectors in Australia (HWA, 2011). In New South Wales alone, required placement hours by 2013 were calculated to be just under half a million hours. The report estimates that “Required placement hours are predicted to increase by a total of 31% by 2019” and “student numbers are expected to rise by approximately 16% by 2019” (HETI, 2015, Appendix E, p. 3).

Social work has been a minor profession in terms of numbers of practitioners in the health system and clinical social work practice is only a small component of the social work profession. According to the Government Job Outlook, “Social Workers are mainly employed in Health Care and Social Assistance; Public Administration and Safety; and Education and Training” ([www.joboutlook.gov.au](http://www.joboutlook.gov.au)). Despite this, social work has been caught up in a system of payments being made for clinical student placements in some eastern seaboard states to encourage more health based placements. A competitive allocation process has led to a patchwork of access to government funding for allied health placements across regions, states, and territories. Unfortunately, there is no body of evidence from government or industry, allied health professionals, the health sector, or universities to show that this policy and payment system has increased placements (HETI, 2015; Little & Harvey, 2007). Evaluation of the effectiveness of this approach or comparison with other methods for capacity building such as partnerships, resource sharing or contractual negotiations is limited.

Anecdotal evidence from within our experience suggests that the cessation of government funding resulted in diverse outcomes including a decrease in the number of health placements, renegotiated partnership agreements based on a range of alternative incentives such as interagency partnerships, research opportunities and support and in house professional learning opportunities. Evidence from the UK about clinical placements in health professions (mainly medicine and nursing) suggests that academic skills development coupled with links to curriculum, approaches to learning, enhancing industry understanding, assessments and building on learning from placements were more important issues than any regulatory or policy impacts of paying for placements (Harding, McKinley, Rosenthal & Al-Seaidy, 2015; Little & Harvey, 2007).

The value of paying for placements or payment for professional supervision as enablers for example of improved quality, enhanced training outcomes and equitable outcomes across the country needs to be questioned. Governments and universities could adopt sustainable allocation practices through promoting flexible and accessible resource redistribution and re-allocation for the universal provision of social work field education placements, rather than paying for allocating funding for workforce development selectively, by targeting only one field of practice.

### **University Level: Increasing Enrolments and Attraction of Fee-Paying Students**

The wider educational landscape is increasingly defined by a “growth oriented consumerist culture” (Sterling, 2008, p. 64). The impact of this culture of growth and market-led interests on field education has been exemplified through increasing demand for placements. For example, placements at La Trobe University in Victoria increased by 60% between 2000 and 2005, and at the University of Tasmania they increased by 85% over 8 years (Cleak & Smith, 2012). Expansion coincides with a declining capacity of human services employers to

provide the required learning context and, under the current model, this has consequences for the continuation and quality of field education (Bloomfield, et al. 2013).

In parallel, funding policies of governments and deregulation of the education sector have encouraged universities to attract fee paying international students. International students are a revenue source for Australian universities. In 2009, they contributed \$18 billion to the Australia economy (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010). Social and cultural benefits to the community have also been identified including increased cultural diversity and cultural capital (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015). Alongside such benefits, there are complexities and challenges in placing international students in field education and in managing the expectations and attitudes of both students and placement providers. International students are often hard to match to local placements and there is often an expectation that these students need to have knowledge about local contexts and regulation before commencing placements (Zuchowski et al., 2014). Host organisations at times are reluctant to offer field education opportunities to international students when they are not seen as future employees, and when language issues are anticipated (Zuchowski et al., 2014). These factors raise questions about how successfully international students can be prepared to meet these expectations of placement providers and whether social work educators are allocated adequate time and resources to undertake this additional preparation work. A study by Taylor, Craft, Murray, and Rowley (2000), for example, found that although international students' educational and social challenges within Australian social work education were recognised by educators, additional resources to alleviate these challenges, such as language or cultural support, were not always adequate. Mentoring programs for international students can help, but resources need to be expanded (Zuchowski et al., 2014). In a context of diminished tolerance for students with difficulties (Bloomfield et al., 2013), these considerations have implications for relationships between stakeholders. Social work field

education could make a significant contribution to positive stories about the social contributions of international, and indeed all students through placement, by embedding sustainability into planning and allocation of support and resources for placements. As Bogo comments: “Field education makes a huge difference in the quality of social programs and well-being in society. This is an important link which we must articulate in a compelling way” (2015, p. 322).

### **Professional Accreditation Level: Number of Hours and Complexity of Accreditation Frameworks**

The AASW sets the standards and requirements for social work education. They require that social work education develops “... students with the skills, values and attitudes required for the effective translation of knowledge and understanding into professional performance” (2017, p. 6). These standards establish principles for social work education that are aimed at developing attributes for thinking, doing and being (Pawar & Anscombe, 2015) and situating field education as a context of learning for practice (AASW, 2017). The current requirements are that students undertake a minimum of 1000 placement hours, over at least two placements (AASW, 2017). Billett comments that “as the need for the provision of practice-based experiences increases, for a wider range of occupations and a greater percentage of students, the resource implications are enormous” (2012 p. 108). For students, these hours can prove onerous as they navigate myriad challenges related to their various roles and responsibilities when undertaking field education (Henry, Boddy, Chee & Sauvage, 2016). Finances, relationships, and responsibilities for dependants can make completing the hours required for field education difficult (Henry et al., 2016). Students often need to give up or reduce employment, balance responsibilities such as child care and other caring roles and are concerned about “... the massive investment of time that placement required in their lives” (Zuchowski, 2013, p. 109). Billett suggests that “supervised placements may not always be

the most effective means of supporting students' learning in practice settings" and makes a case for considering sustainable alternatives (2012, p. 108-109). He advocates use of any alignments between student's employment, work experiences and studies, use of observation followed by structured reflective experiences, and substitute or simulation-type activities. Billett proposes these as "sustainable options for providing practice-based experiences other than through supervised practicums" on the basis that their "learning potential" is realised by the educator, through redesign which integrates learning across the whole of a course (2012, p. 109-110).

The professional accreditation of Australian courses necessitates compliance with a multiplicity of requirements and standards around and including course content, social work attributes and practice standards (AASW, 2017). The AASW (2013) outlines 41 Social Work Attributes across 9 categories, ASWEAS outlines five required curriculum content areas (AASW 2017) and the AASW (2013) Professional Practice Standards outline 23 Standards across 8 categories. At a broad level, programs (or courses) have the task of integrating AASW course content into the field education courses (or units) learning outcomes, of aligning professional practice standards with these, and then layering into this the AASW social work graduate attributes. Alongside the alignment of these requirements, higher education providers also outline graduate attributes that need to be incorporated into course learning outcomes (Hughes & Barrie, 2010; Normand & Anderson 2017). A sustainability lens invites consideration of the impact of such complexity. Bogo for example asks the question: "With an expanded repertoire of competencies to be taught...will there be less time and emphasis on students' achieving in-depth clinical practice ability?" (2015, p. 320).

In social work, distinctions are made between knowledge and practice, and between learning in the classroom and learning in the field. These binary distinctions construct a separation of knowledge and practice, and a separation of contexts and types of learning, which then



require integration. Expanded outcomes criteria further increases demands both on placement providers to create contexts which can fulfil requirements and facilitate their integration, and also on field education units to build capability of placement providers to deliver these requirements. Some authors, such as Hunter, et al. (2015) suggest using common outcomes in accreditation policy and standards, such as a universal field education learning framework that could mandate competencies and practice behaviours that serve as a basis for selecting placements and supervisors, for orientation and training of supervisors, for students learning agreements and evaluation, for integrative seminars and for liaison visits. However, a sustainability lens invites a critique of such standardization in reproducing the instrumentalism of a rationalist approach (Sterling, 2001). It has been argued that “‘efficiency’ and ‘improvement’ in education and institutions are not sufficient responses to the challenge and crisis of sustainability” (Sterling, 2001, p.83).

### **Recognition of Prior Learning**

Existing policy offers alternatives to traditional placement, and greater clarity could further scaffold this purpose. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), is constructed in accreditation policy as the assessment of equivalence and transferability of learning acquired in one context in relation to another (Pitman & Vidovich, 2013). Some argue that RPL should be considered to have a philosophical base regarding the development of academic and social capital and social inclusion (Valentine, Bowles & McKinnon, 2016; Pitman & Vidovich, 2013) and to encompass lifelong learning.

The AASW mandates possible RPL for part or the entire first placement in the BSW and the MSW (Qualifying) degrees. Recently released standards (ASWEAS) have outlined the requirements for subsequent placements where RPL has been granted (AASW, 2017). However, these reflect a set of principles rather than a comprehensive guideline for

processes, standards, and outcomes for RPL. In their studies of RPL and professional social work education, Gair (2013) and Valentine, Bowles and McKinnon (2016) consider these tensions and conclude that RPL is a fine balance between a social justice perspective that recognises students' prior learning, current social work learning needs and the determining by AASW together with industry, of those graduate skills deemed necessary for professional social work.

There are arguments for and against RPL and specifically when referring to statutory social work (Valentine, Bowles & McKinnon, 2016; Gair, 2013). The benefits relate to valuing the skills and expertise of experienced practitioners and reducing the requirement for such practitioners to repeat training and education in areas where they are already experienced, such as case-work or intake and assessment. The arguments against RPL for statutory work, are that the policy and legislative environment changes frequently and is different in each state and territory in Australia and internationally (Tovey & Lawlor, 2004). It has also been argued that RPL should not be a credentialing, tick-a-box activity but a professional learning experience involving reflection on past experiences and the creation of a vision for future individual practices (Valentine, Bowles & McKinnon, 2016).

In considering how to use resources differently, a greater integration and balance between work-based, competency training and the current processes of field education could be developed (Solomon, Graves & Catherwood, 2015). For example, work based learning could recognise paid internships/placements where the student/practitioner has significant industry experience and the placement has been discounted by RPL to less than 500 hours. Diverse cultural ways of helping and leadership could be recognised more strongly in RPL. Also, currency of work experience could be considered alongside ongoing voluntary and community engagement work. Guidance on alternatives will need to consider international students and the specific issues raised in placing these students.

## Conclusion

We are advocating a re-orientation of social work education toward a more ecological vision. This shift legitimises sustainability as a concept, and sustainable adaptation to new conditions as ethical, systemic and future focused educational practice. This critical exploration of regulation and policy contexts is a starting point for dialogue between stakeholders situated in diverse levels of influence. Tensions within the current context indicate a much-needed turn towards sustainability and dialogue can create momentum for acceptance of the need for change, and generate alternatives that reflect an ecological orientation. Ways of creating contexts for purposeful dialogue about sustainability might include:

- Formally situating sustainability as “an explicit central and integrating concept in educational planning and practice” (Sterling 2001, p. 83) and as a focus for reporting, analysis, and discussion during social work accreditations and reviews of accreditation frameworks, practice standards and the Code of Ethics.
- Promoting an anticipative educational culture through making visible: “the link between social work education and field education, effective clinical social workers and social programs, and well-being in society...” (Bogo, 2015, p. 322).
- Creating opportunities for collaborative research into pedagogies that enable sustainable work integrated learning and partnerships (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2008).
- Strengthening national and international relational resources for, and dialogues about sustainability, through applying this lens in practice, research, conferences, professional, and special interest groups and publishing.

An ecological approach offers potential for difference, through recognizing sustainable education as critical to our common purpose. To foster emergence of a social work discourse about sustainability in field education, we invite a continuation of the conversation.

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